

SENATOR WITHEM: Yes, Mr. President, this was a simple little clarification bill that came to the Education Committee early in the session. I am sure we will be able to dispose of it in just a few minutes here and get it advanced on, right, Senator Lynch? The Education Committee heard the bill. We had a credibly large public hearing and the Education Committee was favorably impressed with the goals of the bill as introduced. We did feel that the bill, as introduced, was probably too ambitious for this Legislature to pass in this session. The goals of the bill as originally introduced were in a one-year period to place the average teacher's salary in the State of Nebraska number one among contiguous states. In addition to that, there was a \$50 million component in the bill calling for money to be used in the area of property tax relief for a one-year appropriation of \$150 million. The Education Committee felt that that was too large a chunk of money to deal with in one year. We did not want to get into an auction sort of situation where we would just arbitrarily cut some dollars off. So what we did as a committee is we adopted a philosophical rationale for amending the bill down. What the bill will do now, if the committee amendments are adopted and the bill is advanced, it will do the same thing for elementary-secondary teachers in our state that we did last year for instructors in higher education. Last year in higher education, we began a process to phase in salary increases so that our professors will be at the midpoint of their peer group. At the conclusion of this biennial budget, our professors at the university and state colleges will be paid at the midpoint of their individual peer group. This bill will do as roughly the same sort of...this amendment will do as roughly the same sort of thing for elementary-secondary teachers as we can do. If this bill...amendment is adopted, at the end of the biennium, our elementary-secondary teachers will be paid close to the midpoint of the contiguous states. Where the bill originally called for a one-time \$100 million appropriation, what we are saying with the committee amendments is that \$40 million will be appropriated this year, an additional 35 million next year. That will put \$75 million of state money in the area of paying teachers' salaries. That will bring them to the midpoint of the contiguous group. Also in the committee amendments, the committee felt that there are other proposals this session dealing with property tax relief, other proposals dealing with state aid to education. We struck the fourth part of this bill which called for an increase in state aid to education. We also, there was...now the teacher salary proposal was to come in three phases, the first phase to be a guaranteed